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One Last Time: President Warch Delivers His Final Reunion Convocation

Posted on: June 19th, 2004 by Rick Peterson

The following is a transcript of Lawrence President (1979-2004) Richard Warch's final Reunion Convocation remarks, delivered in the Lawrence Memorial Chapel June 19, 2004.

I trust you will understand that I have anticipated this moment with mixed emotions for some time, and most especially in the last several weeks. In my recent letters to alumni, I've quipped that after Commencement, the final farewell event last Thursday, and Reunion Weekend, you could put a fork in me: I'll be done.

That comment tripped rather easily off the word processor, but what began as an attempt to be lighthearted has taken on a greater and more poignant reality as the days have gone by. And so here we are — or at least here I am — for one last time. I'm pleased that this one last time is with Lawrence alumni and takes place in Memorial Chapel, one of the architectural icons of the campus. I'd like to take a moment to recognize with thanks the exceptional generosity of Dorothy Hoehn, who has provided Lawrence with the wherewithal to renovate the Chapel over the past decade and to thereby both retain its character and enhance its utility. We're grateful.



President Warch, Reunion Convocation 2004

Though I'll try to come up with a few clever quips before I'm done, I take seriously the fact that this is my final opportunity to speak with alumni as Lawrence president. Come to think of it, it's my final opportunity to speak to anybody as Lawrence president, so settle down and buckle up.

Many of you have heard one or another version of my Valedictory remarks, which I have delivered 15 times over the past several months, coast to coast, north to south. For those of you who have not heard the speech, here's the Cliff's Notes version: Lawrence needs and deserves alumni endorsement and advocacy of its purposes and alumni support to further those purposes; liberal learning as professed at Lawrence in both college and conservatory is a powerful and life-changing, if often undervalued and misunderstood, brand of higher education, and it will thrive in the future to the extent that those who have experienced its virtues promote its persistence into that future. That's the short version.

Here's the shorter one: Give to The Lawrence Fund! Naturally, I have sought to be slightly more circumspect in conveying that message over the years and in recent months, but with 11 days to go, I say the hell with circumspection: Give to The Lawrence Fund! Or, as I put in a letter of acknowledgment to an alumnus I know pretty well: "Thanks for the gift. We can use the cash."

Seriously, nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing the alumni donor participation rate return — after a two-year absence — to the 50th percentile. Again borrowing from the Valedictory, I've been sharing with alumni a profound proposition, prompted by the fact that about 67 percent of you have made gifts to The Lawrence Fund at least once in the past three years. And here's the insightful and innovative idea: if alumni made annual gifts annually — that is a difficult concept, so let me repeat it: if alumni

made annual gifts annually — our donor participation rate would be truly enviable. We stood at 47 percent as of yesterday, so I assume a number of you in the Chapel this morning have the power to put us over the top or know those who can; I urge you to do your part and to spread the word.

But enough on that topic. I've only got 11 days to go, so won't have many more opportunities to make the predictable presidential pitch and didn't want to let this one pass by.

Presidential proclivities

One of the consequences of being a college president for 25 years is that one tends to exhaust the repertoire of quips and quotations; tends to repeat oneself; becomes, at best, known for certain turns of phrase and, at worst, for certain rhetorical devices, alliteration being the petard on which I'm most often hung. Over the past several months, various folks have had the proverbial picnic providing parodies of my proclivities (did I mention alliteration?).

First, there was the faux issue of the student newspaper, entitled *The LaWarchian*, written by a gang of 19 merry pranksters from classes of the early 1980s. They called it "affectionate abuse," and while I am pleased to acknowledge the adjective, I can assure you that the noun is accurate. Abuse it was.

Then, Greg Volk had a run at me at the Founders Club dinner on May 6, in a speech entitled "Never Can Say Good-bye" or, as he put it, "Never Can Stop Saying Good-bye," which he likes to consider a terrific testimonial tribute (did I mention alliteration?) but which contained more than a few friendly jabs.

Next, Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester and former dean of the faculty at Lawrence, took his turn at giving me the business at the farewell event in Minneapolis last month, in which he said that

it was a “great and good thing to speak of the values and virtues, not to mention the principles and purposes” that I’ve espoused over the years (did I mention alliteration?) and complimented me on being the “first college president to have his word processor retired by the editors of the Metaphors R Us website.”

Presidential prerogatives

And those are just from alumni and colleagues. The faculty — ah, the faculty — have had their own opportunities, which they have seized with reckless relish and devilish delectation, most often at the Senior Class Dinner. No faculty speaker, it seems, can concoct a set of remarks for that occasion that does not use me as a prop; a few years ago I was a physical prop and just a month ago a Photo-Shopped prop on a take-off of The Matrix called The LUtrix.

On the day the Board of Trustees selected me as the 14th president, Ed West [’32] took me aside and told me that I would be responsible for everything. Art Remley overheard the remark and told me that, as president, his grandfather, “Doc Sammy” Plantz, often did the shopping for the dining rooms.

That sense of presidential oversight and involvement with everything has certainly obtained for me over the past quarter century, but at least I haven’t received a letter from a faculty member resembling the one Professor of English W. E. McPheeters sent to Sammy Plantz in 1921 (he’d written on the same topic a year earlier, evidently to no good effect):

Dear Doctor Plantz: The ivy has grown over my office window to such an extent that when the leaves are out almost all the light is barred from the room. I would be very much obliged if you would have this cut away. It ought to be done now, I presume, before the leaves come out. A great deal of filth from the vines as well as from the birds that nest in them has accumulated just outside the

window of my office. Will you please have the man who cuts the vines clear this away also, as it is not only unsightly but insanitary.

But, if the faculty have not harassed me about overgrown ivy and bird droppings, the students have had their moments, often about food service or other matters that strike them as a perverse example of the Lawrence Difference. Their complaints are familiar, as I had the same ones when I was in college. Our culinary question was this: “How can we have leftover lamb when we never had lamb?”

The students have had at me on other fronts as well. Over the years I have found myself interviewed in the Coffeehouse by an undergraduate who seemed to be auditioning to replace David Letterman, have been the subject of “The Warch Hour” on Trivia Weekend, have gotten roped in to singing “O’er the Fox” for a musical show put on by a student I had taught in Freshman Studies, and have helped students raise money for worthy causes by having whipped cream pies thrown at my face, being placed in a dunk tank, and other moments of a like sort, none of which were intended to honor the dignity of the office, to say nothing of bolstering the self-esteem of the 14th holder of the office. I’ve had my face plastered on t-shirts and on reunion postcards, usually with some clever slogan appended. And I’m not even going to touch the April Fool’s edition of The Lawrentian. My principal claim to fame in that annual effort is that I share center stage with Bert Goldgar in providing grist for the undergraduate humor mill.

Among the indignities I’ve experienced over the years are those that deal with my name. Last spring, a student asked me why I spelled it that way, and I had to confess that my mother had come up with that version by reading Rudyard Kipling’s story about Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. At least she didn’t nickname me Tikki.

Nonetheless, I have received salutations addressed to Ric with a c,

sometimes with a c and a k. There are those who have, in a failed effort to feign friendly familiarity (did I mention alliteration?), called me Dick; actually, my sons Stephen and David often called me Dick, but that was when they were upset with one of my parental rulings. My last name has been spelled like the month or like a swampy area, and while one obsequious writer saluted me as The Distinguished Richard Warch — though that letter was postmarked from overseas and written by someone who didn't know any better — my favorites are letters addressed to me — inexplicably — as Shannon Warch and, at the top of the list, and two times, no less, as Richard Worst.

All of which is to say that, after 25 years, I have come to the conclusion that to be the Lawrence president is to be treated like a piñata by the various constituencies of the institution. And I am pleased to pass these particular and peculiar presidential prerogatives (did I mention alliteration?) on to Jill Beck with my best wishes.

The lady with the Manhattan

Of course, not everyone taking a whack at the piñata does so with the intention to be humorous; not all the abuse is affectionate. I've certainly had reason to confirm Abraham Lincoln's claim that you can please some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot please all of the people all of the time.

In the course of a quarter century, there is a high probability that you will make decisions or take actions that will irritate somebody, and over time, those somebodies can constitute a considerable crowd. But that comes with the territory, and while I have not become wholly inured to the expressions of such aggravation, I have tried to soldier on. The secret, as Casey Stengel put it, "is to keep the guys who hate you away from the guys who are

undecided.”

There are, of course, some minor pleasures even here. As when one faculty member, with whom I had, shall we say, a difference of opinion, told me that he would outlast me at Lawrence and get his way eventually. I had the good grace not to remind him of that comment when he retired.

And then, of course, there are the alumni who, disagreeing with this or that policy or action, play the infamous “Not another dime” card. In these cases, the satisfaction comes from discovering, upon investigation of the donor rolls and records, that it turns out that most of them had not given the first dime, therefore mitigating the threat not to contribute another one.

Then there were the alumni who attended an event several years ago in the early stages of the dispute with the fraternities who passed out literature and treated the question-and-answer portion of the evening as a deposition of yours truly. I’m pleased to report that, a few months ago, following the settlement of that dispute, one of those alumni had the good grace and humor to stand at the question-and-answer portion of a farewell tour event to ask me if I would appreciate it if he didn’t ask a question, to which I replied in the affirmative.

I have many memories of alumni gatherings around the country, and memories especially of Reunion Weekends. The first time I took a tour to visit alumni was when I was serving as vice president for academic affairs and then-director of alumni relations Gil Swift [’59] took me to Chippewa Falls, Minneapolis, and Duluth. I had prepared a set of remarks, though when we got to Duluth for a mid-day luncheon gathering, only four women showed up, one of them from the Class of 1929.

We assembled at 11:30, and the member of the Class of 1929

promptly ordered a Manhattan. Hmmm, I thought, this could get interesting. In any case, with only four people there, I decided not to deliver my remarks but indicated I'd be pleased to respond to questions and have a conversation, at which point one of the women said, "I understand that there are coeducational residence halls at Lawrence, and will you please explain that?"

As I paused to contrive a response, the lady with the Manhattan piped up and said, "When I was at Lawrence, George Smith [I forget the name, but let's say George Smith] got caught climbing through a window at Ormsby Hall [then housing women], and he and 11 sophomore women were kicked out of college." She took a sip of her drink, and continued: "He went on to play football in Green Bay, and that's why they're called the Green Bay Peckers."

Well, that defused any questions about coeducational residence halls and prompted me to think that Lawrence alumni were likely to be a lively and engaging group. I've not been disappointed. I've had wonderful visits with alumni since, but nothing to top that first encounter.

My first memory of Reunion Weekend dates from around the same time, when I was still the chief academic officer, and the alumni office assigned various members of the administration to serve as hosts for individual reunion classes. Margot and I were duly assigned and faithfully showed up and sat at a dinner table in Alexander Gymnasium with members of the class. At which point, the members of the class at the table promptly got up and moved elsewhere. It was not an auspicious beginning, though it has gotten better since, perhaps because we serve adult beverages and provide meals for some of the milestone reunion classes.

Over the past 25 years, I've welcomed over 20,000 alumni to this festive occasion and had the privilege and pleasure of conveying outstanding service and achievement awards to 158 of you,

including the six this morning. I've enjoyed each of these celebratory weekends and appreciate the efforts all of you make to be here and to celebrate, appreciation that is shared, I might add, by the tavern owners along College Avenue, whose annual profits depend almost entirely on

Lawrence reunion weekends

I do want you to know that alumni — along with students, faculty, and friends — have also provided counsel to me over the past quarter century, leading me to realize that being a college president is the easiest job in the world: everyone knows how to do it and will cheerfully inform you of the fact.

Still and all, I look back on my Lawrence years and my interactions with alumni with gratitude and pleasure. I have heard your recollections of favorite professors and the ways in which your liberal education has served you long beyond graduation. I have derived reinforcement from you in appreciating the abiding value of Freshman Studies, and the transforming nature of a Lawrence experience.

Herding cats

I have embraced the traditions of the college; have promoted its special brand of liberal learning, in and beyond Freshman Studies; have acknowledged and sought to sustain and extend the contributions of a distinguished array of presidential predecessors; and have relished the opportunities to work with an assemblage of bright, interesting, engaged — if sometimes contentious — cohort of faculty members, the vast majority of whom I had the privilege of hiring and promoting.

Say what you will about the old adage that dealing with faculty is like herding cats, or that faculty are people who think otherwise, or

that they are individuals, not to say independent contractors, who are not always amenable to “direction.” Indeed, faculty members sometimes respond to such direction like Bartleby the Scrivener: they “prefer not to.”

But, a feisty faculty is, frankly and for the most part, a first-rate faculty; that’s not, I’ll grant you, a causal relationship, but the traits are often paired. “Docile” is not a word I would apply to them, although on occasion “rebarbative” is (look it up!). But that too comes with the territory.

I know I’ll miss the company of such people and the stimulation they provide. They and those whom many of you remember from your Lawrence years carry the teaching and learning mission of college and conservatory forward with excellence, share the commitment to Lawrence and its purposes that you hold, and are a group I am proud to leave for Jill Beck.

The same may be said of students. To be sure, there are moments when their youthful behaviors whiten the hair, though at least those behaviors have not caused me to lose it (the hair, that is). At times one feels like the basketball coach who lamented “How would you like it if your job depended on a bunch of youngsters in shorts running up and down the court?”

But Lawrentians are a great group, and they achieve many moments of insight and accomplishment in their academic and creative pursuits. Observing the ways in which they grow and flourish in the college years is one of the great rewards of the job. I’ll miss them too.

Two years ago, when I was discussing my intention to retire with Harold Jordan [’72] and Jeff Riester [’70], then respectively chair and vice chair of the Board of Trustees, they told me not to feel dispirited if all that I might wish to see accomplished at and for

Lawrence did not come to pass on my watch. That was good advice, though I am obviously pleased that the settlement with the fraternities has been accomplished, and that the slate on that score is essentially clean for Jill Beck.

Leaving Lawrence

One often reads about departing college presidents who say that they've been in the job long enough, or that they have accomplished all they set out to do, or who leave for presumptively greener pastures. Clearly, whatever numerical figure one places on the notion of "long enough," I've blown by it. And any college president who claims a completed set of accomplishments may have set his or her sights too low or may have served an institution without ambitions. However long one serves, there is always more to be done, challenges to be met, improvements to be made, initiatives to be imagined and undertaken. So while the tenure of a college president occurs in a fixed period, the job of a college president is ongoing. It is Jill Beck's good fortune to have the chance to assume that ongoing job at Lawrence. And while other pastures may appear greener, the Lawrence pasture has been green enough for me.



Margot and Rik Warch, Reunion Convocation 2004

Leaving Lawrence is, of course, difficult and bittersweet. I will

miss the place and its people and especially the good friends I have been privileged to make here. I have been deeply touched by the notes and letters of well wishes extended to me by many of you; by the expressions of affection and support I have received from our alumni and friends on the farewell tour — including the “affectionate abuse” provided by the 19 alumni who produced “The LaWarchian”; by the thoughtfulness of the emeriti faculty in honoring Margot and me at a lunch in April and establishing a book fund at Lawrence in our names; by the spirited farewell and gifts from members of the alumni board, who feted and serenaded me at their spring meeting; by the recognition and the gifts from India, Ghana, and Jamaica from the students in Lawrence International at their International Cabaret; by the magnificent result of the Thanks Rik! Campaign, to which many contributed so generously, that will establish an endowed fund to support Björklunden; by the parting recognition conveyed by Mortar Board with its Honorary Award conveyed at the Honors Banquet last month; by the Lucc recognition, the Hyde Park bench and the Lawrence letter jacket from the all-campus farewell on June 5; by the print of my favorite Winnie-the-Pooh quotation from the residence life staff, commemorating my proclivity for reading bedtime stories to students; by having the Lawrence rowing club’s new shell named for me and Margot and christening it a week and a half ago; by the plot of moon acreage given me by the women in Sampson House; and by the bench and a Winifred Boynton cartoon given to me by members of my administrative staff three days ago.

I am also pleased that David Heller [’80], a member of the first class I taught at Lawrence when he was a freshman, has returned to play the organ this morning. If you want to hear the Brombaugh Opus 33 in full voice and some smash-mouth music, I urge you to stay for the postlude.

I assure you that leaving Lawrence is a physical act, not an intellectual or emotional one. Lawrence will be much on my mind

in the months and years ahead, and it will be the focus of and the inspiration for the writing I plan to do in that time. And as an added bonus, I know that Björklunden is only 20 miles away from our retirement home in Ellison Bay.

The years ahead

Finally, then, to John Reeve ['34], who chaired the Board of Trustees in 1979, and to Jeff Riester, Class of 1970, who chairs it today, and to others who served with them on the presidential search committee in 1979, I extend thanks for the opportunity.

And to all of you, let me leave you with this last word: There is a Celtic saying that goes “we are warmed by fires we did not build, we drink from wells we did not dig.” And so might it be said that we are educated at colleges we did not create. But we can stoke the fires, we can maintain the wells, and we can support the colleges, in the present instance this college. None of us created Lawrence, but all of us have benefited from it, and thus I hope will work to sustain and enhance the college for the benefit of those yet to come. For you are not only Lawrence’s alumni, but also its stewards.

To all of you who claim Lawrence as alma mater and who share my great regard for its values and for the important work that it does, thanks for your devotion to this special place and the support you’ve extended to the college and to me for the past quarter century.

I urge you to do the same for Lawrence and for Jill Beck in the years ahead.